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SUBJECT: LEBANON; NASRALLAH DWELLS ON ELECTION;
ASSASSINATIONS -- ARE MORE TO COME?

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Hizballah General Secretary Hassan Nasrallah in his annual al-Quds (Jerusalem) Day speech proposed three scenarios for solving Lebanon's political crisis, including a plan to hold a direct presidential election. PM Siniora and others interpreted Nasrallah's remarks as an effort to distort or even destroy the presidential electoral process as stipulated by the Lebanese constitution. Nasrallah's claim that Israel was behind the serial assassinations of March 14 MP's and other anti-Syrian public figures aroused disdain among March 14 leaders as a blatant defense of Syria, but some also felt it struck a more ominous note, commenting that Nasrallah seemed to suggest there were more assassinations to come. End summary.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS A' LA NASRALLAH AROUSE MIXED REACTIONS

12. (C) In his October 5 address commemorating Jerusalem Day, Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah presented three options for the Lebanese presidential elections: a direct election by the people, which would require amending the constitution; agreeing on a consensus president; or, if direct democracy is not acceptable, finding three to five reputable polling firms to elect the person receiving the highest approval rating. (Note: All these options would prevent March 14 from using an absolute majority vote to elect the president. End note.)

13. (C) Prime Minister Fouad Siniora commented to moderate al-Nahar daily on October 6 that Nasrallah's call for direct popular presidential elections was, in principle, against the constitution, and could lead to one sect crushing the other. Deputy PM and Minister of Defense Elias Murr told the Ambassador that Nasrallah's comments were designed to reassure Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader and opposition candidate Michel Aoun, but that by stressing the need for a consensus candidate, Nasrallah was really pushing for Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman.

14. (C) Likewise, March 14 Druse leader Walid Jumblatt said Nasrallah's description of an appropriate president (strong, independent, and 100 percent made in Lebanon) was designed to bolster Aoun's morale by giving him the impression that Nasrallah backs him. Jumblatt also agrees that Hizballah, under Syrian orders, is supporting Sleiman and that in effect, Nasrallah was saying, &either you choose a president my way, or you won't have a president.8

15. (C) March 14 (Jumblatt bloc) MP Wael Abou Faour commented sarcastically that Nasrallah was talking as if the election were a beauty contest to select Miss Lebanon, but that above all, Nasrallah was defending Syria. March 14 member and former MP Fares Saied commented that Nasrallah is killing institutions, and does not want a president elected through parliament, as stipulated by the constitution.

16. (C) Predictably, FPM member and Michel Aoun's son-in-law Gebran Bassil told Polstaff that the presidential qualifications Nasrallah mentioned apply to Aoun, and that Nasrallah and Syria will accept a consensus president. Bassil also agreed that Nasrallah seemed to be preparing for another war with Israel.

GETTING SYRIA OFF THE HOOK--BUT ARE MORE TO COME?

17. (SBU) PM Siniora, in comments to al-Nahar, did not discount the possibility that Israel committed the serial killings of March 14 MPs in order to facilitate the creation of an international tribunal that would be used to bring down the Syrian regime. However, he asked, if Israel was behind the killings, was it by chance that it chose only March 14 MPs as targets?

18. (C) Both Murr and Abou Faour interpreted Nasrallah's blaming Israel for the assassinations of March 14 MPs Antoine Ghanem, Gebran Tueni, and Pierre Gemayel, and others as a clear indication that more March 14 MPs will be assassinated. Abou Faour said that, in effect, Nasrallah was accusing March 14 (politicians) of &being Jews and Israeli agents,8 and attempting to acquit Syria in advance of charges of involvement in any future assassinations. Jumblatt,

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expressing disdain over Nasrallah's accusation that Israel, backed by the US, is responsible for the assassinations, joked bitterly: &Tell your Israeli friends to stop killing us.8

COMMENT

19. (C) After some initial sweaty and uncomfortable-looking moments, Nasrallah delivered his speech in a, for him, relatively calm manner, and in marked contrast to his customary finger-wagging style. We agree that his blaming Israel for the serial assassinations of anti-Syrian MPs amounts to a veiled threat that worse is to come if March 14 bypasses the opposition's demands for a two-thirds quorum and a (pre-approved by Hizballah, Syria, and Iran) consensus candidate. Nasrallah also described Palestinian tribulations at length, chastised Arab governments for neglecting the Palestinian cause, and criticized US efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East -- none of which elicited much comment from our March 14 interlocutors. End comment.
FELTMAN